No Way to Call Home: Incarcerated Deaf People Are Locked in a Prison Inside a Prison

Monday, 22 August 2016 00:00

By Mike Ludwig (/author/itemlist/user/44659), Truthout | Report

Emmanuel Steward signs to an interpreter on a video relay screen, a special videophone that relays what he says in sign language to his family members back home. Steward is imprisoned on Louisiana, one of the few states in the nation that provides this communication service to deaf prisoners. (Photo: Annie Flanagan)

This story is the result of a nine-month investigation and part one of a multimedia series on deaf prisoners, as part of a reporting collaboration with the Making Contact (http://www.radioproject.org/)radio program.

Use ASL? Click here to see a video interpretation of this story in American Sign Language.

Silent Voices is truly silent. The group's three members are doing what looks like a dance in the front of a classroom at a state prison near the banks of the Mississippi River, just south of Baton Rouge, Louisiana, performing their version of the song "I Believe" by R. Kelly. Instead of singing, the performers are interpreting R. Kelly's lyrics into American Sign Language, or ASL, the sign language most commonly used in the United States. ASL is an animated language. Gestures, facial expressions and even foot-stomping the floor to a beat allow ASL speakers to add context, detail and music to their conversations. The three men in Silent Voices are stunning in this way. The performance is part ASL, part gospel choreography and it's contagiously uplifting -- in stark contrast with the backdrop of armed guards and barbed wire. The classroom erupts into applause.

Standing at the back of the classroom, Susan Griffin is beaming with pride. Griffin, a lead attorney for the state prison system, says this song is a real crowd pleaser at the gospel revivals held at Angola, the notoriously brutal prison farm to the north. "For me, it brings everything together," she says.

The members of Silent Voices and a dozen or so classmates are all part of the Louisiana Department of Corrections' ASL interpreting program, which Griffin touts as one of a kind, at least in the US. Qualified prisoners can earn a certificate in ASL interpreting, which could potentially lead to job opportunities if they are released. Louisiana also uses these "offender interpreters" to interpret for the deaf population in its vast prison system.

William Johanson trains a dog in the yard at Rayburn Correctional Center in Angie, Louisiana. After receiving complaints from another prisoner in the mid-1990s, federal officials sued the Louisiana state prison system on behalf of Johanson to bring facilities with deaf prisoners into compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act. (Photo: Annie Flanagan)

Louisiana has the highest incarceration rate of any state in the US, and the US has the highest incarceration rate of any country on the planet. That's why Louisiana is known as the "prison capital of the world." The operation is not cheap. "We're broke," Griffin says flatly.

Louisiana is known for supporting its prison system with prison labor, and the ASL program is no different. Paying professional interpreters from the outside to interpret for deaf prisoners would cost hundreds of thousands of dollars a year. For Griffin the program is a win-win innovation that provides job training while saving taxpayer dollars. It also helped the prison system get out of hot water with the feds.

From the squad car to the prison cell, advocates say there is a severe shortage

"We had to fight for it," Griffin says of the program. "The Justice Department sued [us] and said we were not in compliance." She was referring to compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the federal law that

of ASL interpreters in the criminal legal system.

requires public facilities such as schools, jail and prisons to accommodate people with disabilities and provide equal access to programs and services.

The Justice Department launched a probe into Louisiana's prisons in the mid-1990s after receiving complaints from a fellow prisoner on behalf of William Johanson, a deaf man serving a life sentence. Officials sued the prison system to increase basic accessibility measures for Johanson, from interpreters to fire alarms that flash bright lights. Officials originally wanted Louisiana prisons to hire professional interpreters to be on call for prisoners like Johanson, not "offender interpreters" who work for little or no pay.

Students practice American Sign Language during a class at a prison near Baton Rouge. Some go on to interpret for deaf prisoners, a practice that advocates say is problematic, but better than nothing. (Photo: Annie Flanagan)

Deaf advocates agree, arguing that allowing prisoners to do very low or unpaid labor interpreting for other prisoners could lead to the exploitation or coercion of some of the most vulnerable in the population. Advocates are excited that prisoners are learning ASL -- the more people who can speak the language, the better -- but they argue that the ADA requires neutral, professional interpreters divorced from the politics of prison life on duty at jails and prisons, not to mention police stations, and parole and probation offices.

Still, Griffin was able to negotiate the program into a legal settlement with federal officials, and since then, the number of disciplinary actions against deaf prisoners have dropped dramatically. Students also report success. "This program is meaningful to the population, and we got to help each other," says Jerry Wade, a graduate of the program who interprets for fellow prisoners. Wade's father, who has since passed away, was deaf, and Wade says he would never forget how proud his father was when he visited the prison on graduation day. "That was the first time I could communicate with him clearly using his language."

Louisiana's interpreter program is an outlier. From the squad car to the prison cell, advocates say there is a severe shortage of ASL interpreters in the criminal legal system. Deaf people are often denied access to interpreters in court, and lack options for contacting lawyers, doctors, friends and family once in custody. Police and prison guards often misunderstand people who are deaf and hard of hearing, leading to unjust arrests, false confessions and physical abuse. Parole and probation offices often fail to provide interpreters for the deaf, who can be coerced into signing legal documents and statements that they don't understand. The result is the warehousing of deaf people in jails and prisons where the inability to communicate makes it difficult to survive, much less find a way back to the free world.

"Everyone involved in the system is lacking competency in deaf culture and deaf communication," Lewis says.

"I think it's important to note that everyone is behind. There is not one prison system that I would say gets it completely right," says TL Lewis, the director of the deaf advocacy group Helping Educate to Advance the Rights of the Deaf (HEARD). "With 2-plus million people behind bars -- the majority of whom being people with disabilities -- there's no excuse and no room for not getting this right. It's the definition of a crisis."

A teletypewriter, or TTY machine, in a storage closet at Rayburn Correctional Center. Deaf prisoners say the devices are difficult and costly to use, leaving them isolated from friends, family and legal representatives. (Photo: Annie Flanagan)

The deaf community includes people who identify as deaf, hard of hearing, deaf-blind, as well as deaf people with other disabilities and children of deaf adults. This community has its own distinct culture, but few in the criminal legal system know much about it, according to Lewis. For example, deaf people often touch others on the shoulder to get their attention. "Touch a cop like that and see what happens," Lewis says.

Some deaf and hard of hearing people are not considered culturally deaf; perhaps their parents pushed lip reading and hearing implants instead of ASL. Still, spoken language is not an efficient form of communication, but how does a deaf person who can't speak well express this to busy cop or an angry prison guard? The same problems exist in mainstream schools, where deaf students are chronically underserved, leading to educational and developmental delays, according to Lewis. Without a basic understanding of the deaf experience, police, school principals, judges, prosecutors and defense attorneys can all be complicit in funneling deaf people into prisons, where they are at risk of physical and sexual abuse. "Everyone involved in the system is lacking competency in deaf culture and deaf communication," Lewis says.

Across the country, civil rights attorneys are suing jail and prisons on behalf of the deaf imprisoned community in order to force compliance with federal disability laws, but stubborn prison bosses will often fight long court battles before improving conditions. Last year, an HIV-positive deaf man in Washington, DC, won a civil lawsuit (http://aclu-nca.org/news/victory-district-violated-deaf-prisoners-rights-federal-court-rules) against local jailers and their private contactors who held him without an interpreter or adequate telecommunication services for 51 days, during which time he was unable to effectively communicate with a doctor about much-needed medication. Prison bosses in Kentucky and Maryland (http://www.washlaw.org/news-a-media/423-deaf-inmates-md-ky-settlement) recently agreed to settlements requiring qualified interpreters and videophones, and similar lawsuits have been filed in other states where advocates exhausted other options.

It's a piecemeal path to reform, but Lewis says reform is desperately needed. The criminal legal system is difficult for hearing people to navigate, but for deaf people it can be a complete nightmare. From their first interaction with the police to incarceration, deaf people can fall through the cracks into a world of silent isolation -- a prison inside a prison.

Fighting for the Right to Call Home

Emmanuel Steward signs during an interview at Rayburn Correctional Center. (Photo: Annie Flanagan)

Scott Huffman was one of the first graduates of Griffin's ASL program. When I first met Huffman at a New Orleans coffee shop in late 2015, he was working to convince a large jail in a neighboring suburb to install video relay screens for a deaf man being held there. Video relay screens, or VRS, allow deaf people to make video calls to remote interpreters who translate their conversation from sign language to English for the receiver on the other end. For many in the deaf community, VRS is a part of everyday life, just like a landline telephone, but the service is not available at the Jefferson Parish Prison and most jails across the country.

"Why do the authorities feel like they don't have to follow the law?"

The federal government reimburses VRS companies for calls made on their systems with funds collected from a universal tax on phone bills, so the service is essentially free. These companies also offer the VRS equipment to jails and prisons for free, so installing them sounds like a no-brainer. Even the notorious Orleans Parish Prison in New Orleans, which has been fending off a federal takeover due to violence and poor conditions, recently installed VRS. When I met back up with Huffman in June 2016, however, he still had not made any progress in neighboring Jefferson Parish.

"They did diddlysquat," Huffman told me as we sat down at another coffee shop. "Why do the authorities feel like they don't have to follow the law?"

Jefferson Parish Prison caught Huffman's attention because a young deaf man named Nelson Arce was being held there. Arce, who has struggled with opioid dependence, traveled to a drug treatment center for deaf patients in California after being charged with drug possession. Crossing state lines turned out to be a probation violation, and Arce was sent back to Louisiana mid-treatment. In an interview, Arce's father said that the probation office refused to provide interpreters, and officers tried to communicate by writing notes and reading lips, so miscommunication was inevitable. Instead of receiving the treatment he so badly needed, Arce ended up back in jail, without VRS to call home.

As an on-the-ground activist with HEARD, Huffman hears stories like this all the time. He tries to work with jails and probation offices to make them more accessible to the deaf and hard of hearing, but when advocacy and education fail, lawsuits often follow. Just last week, attorneys filed a class-action lawsuit against Louisiana's state parole and probation office on behalf of three deaf parolees, alleging that they have been consistently denied access to interpreters and other aides at required classes and meetings.

Huffman became an advocate while serving a five-year sentence in a Louisiana prison where about 10 deaf prisoners were held. He became fascinated with ASL after watching the deaf men talk to each other, so he asked his mother to mail him a sign language dictionary and began studying. When he felt confident, he approached the deaf men to try out his new skills and soon became immersed in the language. The warden eventually asked Huffman to move into the unit where the deaf men lived, and he became their de facto interpreter, learning first-hand about the challenges they faced everyday.

"Not only do we lead the world in incarceration, we have a unjust system, especially for these deaf, deaf-blind, deaf-disabled, hard of hearing prisoners," Huffman says. "They live in a prison within a prison, so not only are they incarcerated, but now they're extra incarcerated because they don't have communication."

Huffman says guards are known to rough up deaf and hard of hearing prisoners for ignoring verbal orders, and the deaf prisoners have trouble accessing services like education, health care and addiction treatment. Deaf prisoners are also unable access the 24-hour rape hotlines that are available to hearing prisoners, and it can be impossible to report abuse and seek help from medical staff and counselors without the help of an interpreter. Prisons are isolating places that spur violence and harm, including violence perpetrated by authority figures: Research shows (http://www.allgov.com/news/top-stories/half-of-sexual-assaults-in-jail-and-prison-committed-by-guards-and-most-by-female-staff-140125?news=852260) that guards commit about half of all sexual assaults.

Members of the Steward family put a cell phone on speaker and gather around to talk to Emmanuel Steward, who is calling through a video relay service from prison. The Stewards say the video relay has made it much easier to stay in touch, but they want Emmanuel moved to a prison closer to their home in southern Louisiana so they can make more in-person visits. (Photo: Annie Flanagan)

Huffman says he saw a lot of "terrible things" happen to deaf prisoners and, acting as a hearing ally, tried to prevent as much as he could. "Deaf people are easy targets, so a lot of sexual abuse happens, most often," he says, explaining how a deaf prisoner's inability to pick up on cues in the shower or bathroom could lead to unwanted advances and even assault. "So, prison culture and deaf culture are two different worlds. And so deaf people don't have the opportunity to auditorily learn the things that you need to learn about prison culture when you get there."

At the time, Rayburn Correctional Center did not have VRS. As in the vast majority of jails in prisons on the US, the closest thing to a telephone that Huffman's deaf pals could use was a teletypewriter, or TTY, which sends text messages typed on a keyboard over traditional telephone landlines. On the outside, cell phones and VRS have largely replaced TTY in the deaf community, which considers TTY to be as obsolete as pagers and pay phones.

"I was the VRS, I was the videophone," Huffman says. "I would use my family's money, and ... contact [the deaf prisoners'] families, and I would interpret the phone conversations and all that."

This wasn't just inefficient; it was costly. Private companies that provide phone services at prisons have long been accused of price gouging. In fact, per-minute rates have gotten so out of control that the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) is currently fighting a major legal battle to cap them, marking a major victory for civil rights advocates. Using TTY is even worse. Until a recent FCC intervention, prison phone companies charged same per-minute rate for TTY calls as landline phone calls, even though TTY calls can take much longer to complete, especially for those who primarily speak ASL. Families of deaf prisoners have sent copies of phone bills for hundreds of dollars to HEARD's office, and many in the deaf community no longer use TTY to begin with.

ASL and English have different rules for structure and syntax, so rough ASL-to-English translations over a TTY machine can easily become garbled. Facial expressions and body language are essential parts of an ASL conversation, but there is no room for physical communication in a text message. Plus, most lawyers don't use TTY, and advocates complain that, citing security concerns, some prisons block calls to government-funded relay services that read TTY messages out loud for hearing people on the other end. Many -- but certainly not all -- deaf people use ASL, not English, as their primary language, and translating specialized vocabulary about medical issues, legal cases over TTY can be a time-consuming challenge.

After his release in 2013, Huffman and HEARD worked with Griffin to install VRS at Rayburn Correction Center and other state facilities with deaf prisoners, making Louisiana one of the few states to offer the service. Earlier this year, I visited Rayburn with a multimedia team to watch Emmanuel Steward and William Johanson, the two remaining prisoners from Huffman's original circle, make calls on the VRS. As other prisoners looked on from inside a large caged room, the men took turns sitting down in front a cabinet in a hallway that holds the video screen. They dialed a number on a keyboard and interpreters appeared on the screen, ready to relay their words to family members back home.

Speaking through interpreters in the prison's white-walled conference room, both Steward and Johanson told us that the VRS was a game-changer. Johanson, who was incarcerated with little formal education, says using TTY was often "puzzling" and lawyers didn't even have the machines in their offices. He eventually gave up, opting to write letters instead.

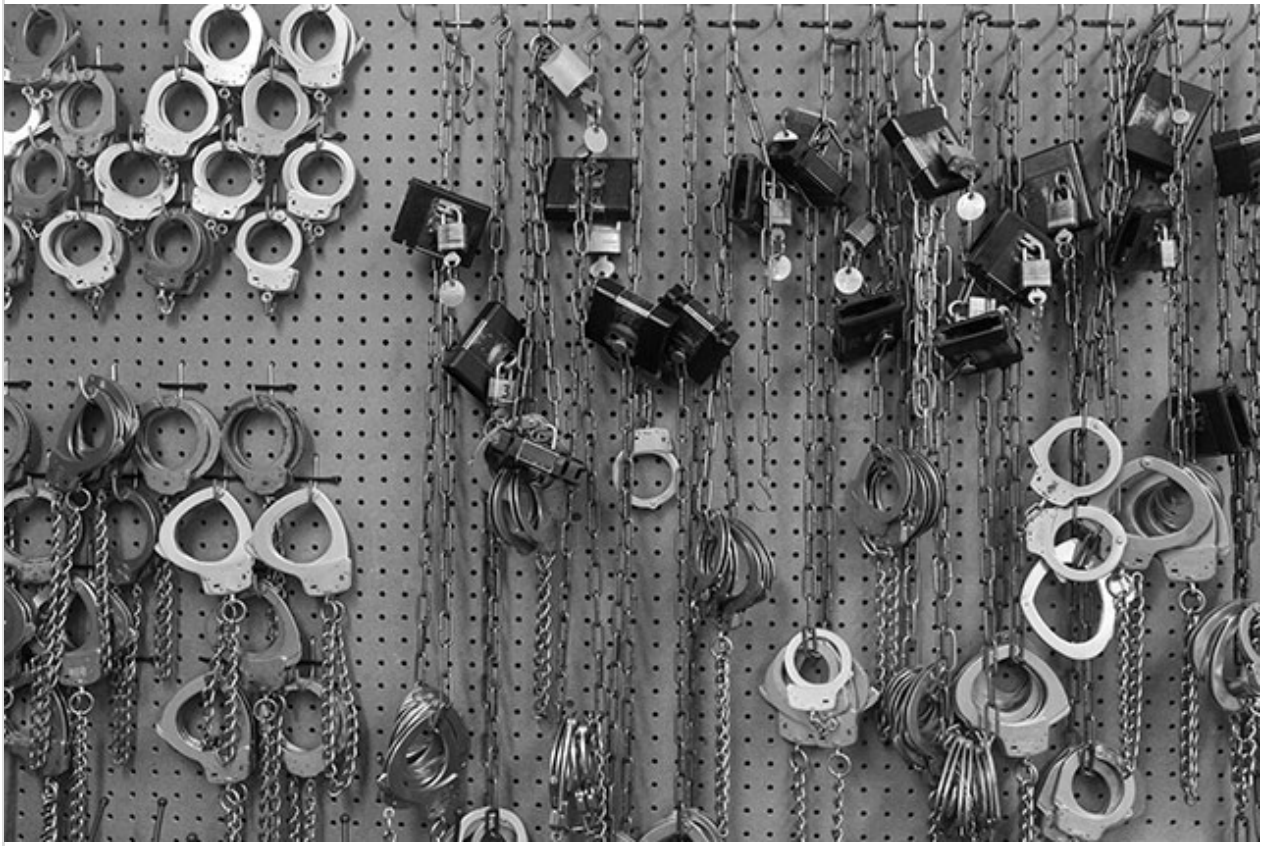
"I couldn't understand the stuff they'd mean," Johanson says through an interpreter. "I couldn't understand their voice. Friends, they didn't like that. Then the charge ... it's way over their heads; the price was too high for the TTY."

After the video relay screen was installed, Johanson was able to call his sister for the first time since he was incarcerated in 1976. He found out his father had passed away since the last time he had been in contact with his family. Still, his sister was elated that he was able to call and could keep calling, free of charge. "My sister was glad when they were able to use that videophone, it's a lot of convenience," he says. "It's real good, we like that video phone better than the TTY. We're communicating better. I'm saying the same thing when I'd type and have long words breaking up."

Steward says wasn't always sure if his family understood him correctly over TTY, and vice versa. "But now with the video relay, it's natural," Steward says through an interpreter. "Yeah. It's much clearer. Not as many errors with the communications, so you really much prefer it, so it's not as much time lost with correcting what was said." He says it's also brought him closer to family members, who live several

hours away and cannot afford to make frequent in-person visits. "They've got a real person that they're talking to, even if it's just a relayed person, you know," Steward says with a laugh. "They actually hear a voice."

Prison Phone Companies and the FCC



Handcuffs hang in the front office of the Rayburn Correctional Center. (Photo: Annie Flanagan)

Back in 2013, the FCC was poised to make a preliminary but landmark ruling on phone service in jails and prisons, a full 10 years after a petition was filed on behalf of low-income families struggling to pay for phone calls with loved ones behind bars. HEARD joined this coalition and asked the FCC to lower rates for deaf prisoners or replace aging TTY machines with VRS altogether. Research shows (http://www.doc.state.mn.us/pages/files/large-files/Publications/11-11MNPrisonVisitationStudy.pdf) that keeping prisoners in contact with friends and family on the outside can reduce recidivism. Plus, without interpreters or a meaningful and affordable way to contact the outside world, deaf people can get lost in the system (http://wtop.com/arlington/2015/03/deaf-immigrant-jailed-6-weeks-with-no-access-to-interpreter/), sometimes not even knowing why they are there.

"I have had to communicate with numerous deaf people about sexual assault or impending death via a TTY, in English -- a language that many of them have never and never will master."

"In no uncertain terms, lack of access to telecommunications has made it practically impossible for deaf, deaf-blind, deaf-disabled and hard of hearing people, and many hearing individuals who rely on sign language to maintain contact with loved ones, communication with counsel to aid in their own defense, and to maintain their sanity and safety," says Lewis, who recalled a deaf prisoner in Florida

who called her office "to say his last goodbyes" out of fear of violence. "I have had to communicate with numerous deaf people about sexual assault or impending death via a TTY, in English -- a language that many of them have never and never will master. This is unfair to them and to me." The prisoner in Florida still lives in fear at the same facility.

HEARD submitted dozens of comments to the FCC, including handwritten letters from deaf prisoners who reported trouble keeping in touch with family members, and described the painful isolation they were experiencing. Some detailed grievances with prison staff had gone unresolved for years. In a national survey conducted by HEARD, 35 percent of deaf prisoners reported that they did not have access to a TTY machine. Another 27 percent had access "sometimes," and only about 19 percent reported that the TTY machine in their facility was in "good working condition."

The FCC agreed that it takes much longer to type out conversation over TTY than to speak over the phone, illegally subjecting a group of prisoners to price discrimination due to disability. The commission estimated TTY calls take about four times as long to complete, and proposed capping the rate for TTY calls at 25 percent the per-minute rate that providers charge hearing prisoners. HEARD argued that estimate did not take into account the "varying rates of literacy among deaf prisoners," but any rate decrease was better than nothing.

The prison phone industry disagreed. The prison phone company CenturyLink argued that, in its experience, TTY calls only take about twice as long as voice calls. Securus, the leading prison phone company, claimed that the discount was "not appropriate" because TTY calls and voice calls "incur the same costs." The firms also opposed the FCC's proposal to lower the costs of prison phone calls in general.

An outdoor chain link fence casts a shadow across Emmanuel Steward's hands. (Photo: Annie Flanagan)

In order to secure lucrative contacts in many states, prison phone companies are expected to pay "site commissions" to the prisons themselves. Reformers refer to these payments as "kickbacks," (https://nationinside.org/campaign/prison-phone-justice/facts/) and estimate that they generate about an annual $152 million in revenue for prisons nationwide. The cost of these payments are passed down to prisoners and their families in the form of add-on fees and higher rates, but the industry told the FCC that site commissions are a cost business they should be compensated for.

Those arguments didn't fly with the FCC, which had come under mounting pressure (http://www.truth-out.org/news/item/11690-flying-kites-to-the-fcc-demanding-fair-prison-phone-call-rates) from activists and reformers. In 2013, the FCC issued interim caps on rates for all long-distance, interstate calls to and from prisons, and in 2015 issued a final order reducing those caps by 50 percent and setting caps on local and statewide calls for the first time. The FCC also banned certain add-on fees and refused to consider "site commissions" as a cost to providers when setting the new rates, but the commission stopped short of banning these "kickbacks" altogether. Instead, the FCC encouraged prisons to do away with site commissions on their own, as some state systems already have.

The final ruling was supposed to cut the cost of prison phone calls in half, to about 11 cents per minute. Before the ruling came down, rates in some states could potentially balloon to as high as $14 per minute, according to the FCC.

"Deafness is a silent and non-obvious disability ... a typical prison guard may think you can just write them notes."

Prison phone companies quickly lashed out (http://www.securustechnologies.com/about-us/press-releases/-/asset_publisher/UtsVdgWJI3di/content/securus-requests-that-federal-communications-commission-fcc-refrain-from-issuing-misleading-statements-that-can-incite-violence?inheritRedirect=false&redirect=http://www.securustechnologies.com/about-us/press-releases?p_p_id=101_INSTANCE_UtsVdgWJI3di&p_p_lifecycle=0&p_p_state=normal&p_p_mode=view&p_p_1&p_p_col_pos=2&p_p_col_count=3) against the ruling. Securus CEO Richard Smith called it "a colossal error in judgment," and the industry took the FCC to court. In March, a federal judge issued a partial stay on the ruling, temporarily blocking the latest rate caps, but leaving the interim interstate caps and several other portions in place, including reduced rates for TTY calls and other protections for deaf and hard of hearing people in prison.

The FCC ruling also "strongly" encourages jails and prisons to install video relay systems for deaf prisoners, but stopped short of issuing the national mandate that HEARD had hoped for, leaving Huffman and civil rights attorneys to continue taking on jails and state prison offices one by one.

Elliot Minceberg, a consulting attorney with the Washington Lawyers Committee, which has filed a series of lawsuits on behalf of deaf prisoners, says prisons are "notoriously slow on technology and tech improvement." Federal prisons, for example, have long opposed VRS due to supposed "security concerns," which always trump accommodations for prisoners. Plus, Minceburg says, prison bosses and their employees are often ignorant of deaf culture.

"Deafness is a silent and non-obvious disability ... a typical prison guard may think you can just write them notes," says Minceberg, who agrees that it shouldn't take lawsuits to enforce federal law and ensure that deaf prisoners have equal access to services. "This is something that can and should be done.... This shouldn't require litigation, but unfortunately it does."

Profiting Off Deaf Prisoners?

William Johanson stands in a hallway at Rayburn Correctional Center, where he is serving a life sentence. (Photo: Annie Flanagan)

With the FCC's rate caps threatening revenue, prison phone companies have sought new revenue streams with "electronic messaging" services and video chats. Reformers welcome new services for prisoners and their families, but say these options are expensive and highly restrictive compared to services like email or Skype. Companies like Securus have even convinced some sheriff's departments to replace in-person visits (http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2015-04-27/expensive-prison-skype-is-squeezing-out-in-person-visitation) with "video visitation," (http://www.prisonpolicy.org/visitation/report.html) a shift that advocates ardently oppose. Lewis said the companies could box out VRS as well.

TL Lewis is well aware that prison phone companies are looking for new ways to make money. In fact, companies like Securus may now view VRS providers as competition in its emerging videophone market. In its comments to the FCC, Securus boasted about installing 5,000 videophones at US facilities, but opposed HEARD's proposal to require VRS at jails and prisons, arguing that such technology is a privilege, not a right.

VRS systems relay calls through an ASL interpreter; the video visitation and chat services offered by prison phone companies do not. VRS calls are also free, while the so-called "prison Skype" services are not yet regulated by the FCC and can be costly.

However, Lewis says prison phone companies are trying to convince jailers that the technologies are one and the same, and their contracts require them to use the pay-to-play services instead of the federally subsidized VRS.

"Phone companies are telling jails, prison and other facilities that these facilities cannot allow VRS installation based on these companies' exclusive phone contracts that, mind you, do not provide accessible telecommunications for the deaf," Lewis says. "Now, we have to convince jails and prisons that this is not the case -- if the contract does not provide accessible means for calling, federal disability rights law requires that the jail or prison go further."

Several companies have told prison administrators that VRS videophones are "expensive," "impossible" and "incompatible," among other excuses for why they cannot be installed, according to Lewis. "It's difficult to find any other reason why prison telecom companies would posit any of this if not for ignorance and the possibility of cutting into their bottom line," Lewis says. "Of course, it's not really cutting into their bottom line because countless deaf have gone for years without access rather than have their loved ones pay these exorbitant costs for ineffective communication in English."

"I think they are just looking for as many ways to profiteer from people who are incarcerated. It's a sick game they play."

Back in Louisiana, it's been over a year since Huffman first contacted the Jefferson Parish Prison about installing VRS. Last October, a jail official told Huffman that Securus was already installing video visitation technology, and the company had assured jail officials that it could integrate interpreter services into that system, according to a series of emails shared with Truthout. Huffman explained that this was impossible, because only a few companies are licensed to provide video relay services, and these services are free, unlike whatever service Securus could offer. The conversation has gone nowhere since.

Attempts to reach a media representative and the government affairs office at Securus have been unsuccessful. The Jefferson Parish Sherriff's Office also failed to issue a response to my repeated requests for information, including a copy of its contract with Securus.

"I think they are just looking for as many ways to profiteer from people who are incarcerated," Huffman said. "It's a sick game they play." Huffman says there are at least two deaf people currently being held at Jefferson Parish Prison, but the jail has done "zero" in terms of accommodation. "They violate everything and seem to be invincible."

It's not easy to speak truth to power when power refuses to listen, but Huffman is committed to finishing what he started when he decided to immerse himself in ASL and deaf culture in prison. "Before I left, I promised those guys that I would do something, I would do whatever I could to improve the system in its current state to something better," Huffman says. Of course, he notes, the best accommodation would be for them to not be imprisoned at all. "I would take them all home with me if I could."

Austin Finamore interprets this story into American Sign Language, part one.

Austin Finamore interprets this story in American Sign Language, part two.

Jasmin Mara López, a freelance producer for the radio program Making Contact, contributed reporting to this story. This reporting collaboration was made possible in part by The Media Consortium.

MIKE LUDWIG (/AUTHOR/ITEMLIST/USER/44659)

Mike Ludwig is an investigative reporter at Truthout and a contributor to the Truthout anthology, *Who Do You Serve, Who Do You Protect? (http://www.truth-out.org/whodoyouserve)* Follow him on Twitter: @ludwig_mike (https://twitter.com/ludwig_mike).

Show Comments